

Every day throughout my childhood and adolescence, I had to cross back and forth between Armenian and American cultures and communities. I attended public school in New York City so I was immersed in the ethnic/racial/cultural diversity of the people I encountered there. Still, in my world, school was the epitome of American life and culture to me. Everyone spoke English, for one thing. It's a big thing, really. Not only because I was a very linguistically sophisticated little kid (I spoke three languages) but for everyone the language used is loaded with so much meaning, on so many levels. True, there were many Englishes spoken at school depending on one's non-dominant culture. Some notable examples: African American English, Yiddish English, Spanglish, South Asian English, Caribbean English and more. Many of the children I sat in class with were from immigrant families, like me. But unlike me, the other kids' families were more assimilated, or so I believed, and they were much more tolerant of American cultural influences than my family. In my internal dialogue I referred to them as "the other kids", or "American kids". My parents called them "odar". That's a confounded Armenian word that means anyone who's not Armenian. The other kids all dressed in the latest fashions, something that was of great significance in couture-obsessed NYC. Until around 14 or so, I wore clothes either made for me or chosen for me by my mother and then approved by my father. What a total dork! I took beatings for that in school. The other kids watched the same TV shows and talked about them in the lunchroom. When I listened in, I had no idea what they were talking about because American tv was forbidden in my house. My father deemed it a bad influence on his traditional Armenian children. He had no intention of having his daughters EVER

become American. Um, yeah, hayrik, but remember? we were born here, so we actually ARE American? I do remember some of the tv show names that the other kids talked about. I was especially fascinated by the comics-spawned shows like Batman and Superman. I secretly and voraciously read those comic books and other Marvel and DC titles, crouched down in the magazine aisle in the supermarket while my mother shopped. Sometimes multiple comic books per shopping trip (I was a fast reader). I later found out that my mother knew all along what I was doing, and discretely let me do it. The other kids also ate American food. Their lunchboxes contained baloney sandwiches with white bread and mayonnaise. They had snacks like potato chips and pretzels. Their parents even let them eat candy! How I envied them their American food as I sat in the lunchroom and unwrapped my pita bread with tahin and feta cheese and lettuce and tomato sandwich (yum!). In my family's house there were the ever-present food fragrances, or odors, to odars. In the other kids' homes (until I was well into high school, I'd had only a few occasions to be in an odor kid's house, which my father strictly forbid), I could smell nothing. They would come home from school, go to the kitchen, read a note on the refrigerator door from mom, instructing them what to pull out of the freezer and heat up for their dinner. When I came home from school I smelled manti, dolma, kebab, lubya, vosp, simit, gata, choerek... Manti is a very rich Armenian ravioli-type dish of pasta dough stuffed with ground meat baked in a flavorful tomato broth, served with a dollop of yogurt. It was my favorite dish, and it's perhaps the food aroma I most associate with the home of my childhood memories. I knew that my mother began her cooking early, right around 10:20 in the morning. I knew this

from the days when I was home from school, and I would hang around the house with her. At 10:00 she would put on the Armenian coffee and prepare herself a couple of cups. She'd sit at the kitchen table, in her place right under the clock, smoke a cigarette, and sip audibly on her tiny cup of deep thick semi-sweet black coffee. Afterwards, she'd turn over her cup into the tiny saucer, wait for the grounds to dry, open the cup and read her future. She'd tease me about that because I obstinately thought that it was all nonsense, while she was regarded as quite a good coffee cup reader among her Istanbul Armenian lady friends. She'd get all mysterious and say really obvious things like, "It says I will receive news from far away soon." Unimpressed and with a distinctly American eye roll, I'd shoot back, "We are Armenian. We always get news from far away." My mother would laugh; it always made me happy to see her laughing. We were both messing with each other. My mother would talk to me if I was in the kitchen, sitting across from her at my place at the table. She'd tell stories, oh, what an amazing storyteller she was. And very funny. That is when she wasn't depressed or psychotic. When she was alone, which was most of the time, she would talk to herself during her little coffee and cigarette ritual. I know this because I spied on her and saw it. I spied on her because she was mentally sick, as the adults said, and I believed I needed to keep tabs on her mood and state if I was to survive in that house. My mother started her house-work-day drinking Armenian coffee, smoking a cigarette, and talking to herself. The other kids' mothers went to work outside the house. They were not "crazy" and they did not talk to themselves. They had not survived unspeakable horrors in a country whose dominant culture hated them. Or so I thought.

Later I learned about the Holocaust, and realized what those numbers on the forearm of my classmate Rachel's dad meant. Later I learned about African enslavement, and realized what trauma was surely passed down to my classmate Sharona, not to mention ongoing racism, segregation, inequality and injustice that must have plagued her over and over every day. But as a little kid, or bigger kid, it all felt like a monolith: America. All the people and things that were "out there", beyond the seemingly impermeable bounds of my father's house, beyond the Armenian community in New York, which was my only social life outside of "American school" (yes, that's what we called it in my family). It was all dursuh, outside, the world outside our world. And so I, from the age of 4 or 5, had to navigate between and among worlds every day (there were also the kids on the block, the odar neighbor kids, but that's for another, more adventure-filled story) back and forth like some intergalactic traveler of my comic book future.